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Dr. John B. King Jr.  
New York State Education Commissioner  
New York State Education Department  
89 Washington Avenue  
Albany, New York 12234

Dear Commissioner King,

I implore you to initiate a thorough review of this year's NYS Math Assessments in grades three through five. I have been an elementary principal for twelve years, and am quite honestly horrified by the content, format, language and presentation of this year's exams. In addition, the scoring and reporting procedures and insistence that test items remain permanently undisclosed to the public suggest that the process is both unreliable and artificial.

The poor design of this year's NYS Math Assessments demonstrates complete disregard for the cognitive and emotional development of elementary children. Specifically, third fourth and fifth grade test booklets have contained:

- Unfamiliar, untaught material
- Deliberately misleading questions & answer choices
- Ambiguous, poorly worded questions & answer choices
- Inconsistent directions
- Misplaced answer lines
- Omitted directional cues
- Multiple answers that could be correct
- Inappropriately sized work spaces
- Extended multiple steps (as many as 5 or 6) in single problems
- Incomplete/missing information
- Reading levels that are above grade

Each of these items has significantly impacted student performance on these tests. They have caused confusion, anxiety, miscalculations, distraction, misuse of time, and fatigue. Compounding these factors is the inordinate length of these exams, which is beyond the stamina and attention span of eight to ten year olds.

The embedded field test questions on this year's NYS Assessments have had a particularly negative impact on the performance of our students. As the requirements for next year under the Common Core State Standards are very different from the expectations for this year, I assume that all of the unfamiliar topics are field test questions. These questions (which are very identifiable to adults familiar with the differences between current standards and the CCSS) are based on material to which children have had no exposure, thus rendering them useless as field

test items. "Common Core questions" accounted for approximately 12% of the third grade, 8% of the fourth grade, and nearly 17% of the fifth grade questions. It is inconceivable as to why such a large portion of the tests should have been devoted to questions that obviously can provide no helpful information, since the topics are not currently required in NYS curriculum. (If these were not field test questions, then the test design poses an even greater problem, as the developers were not adequately familiar with current NYS Standards.) These questions caused additional anxiety for students who were already functioning under stressful conditions. Children, at all grades and ability levels, spent excessive amounts of time on these questions and became confused and agitated by their inability to answer them. Some of our brightest children reported to teachers after each day of the test that the questions made them feel stupid.

At the other end of the spectrum, the tests have been an emotional and physical assault on our special needs students and English language learners. Many of these children generally experience greater success in mathematics than reading, as they are knowledgeable and confident regarding the content and concepts. The reading levels, vocabulary and language structures made it impossible for them to access the tests and demonstrate their mathematical knowledge. In room after room, children could be seen twenty minutes into the test with their heads on their desks or staring blankly into space. When teachers checked on them, they simply said, "It's too confusing," or "I can't do this," and hopelessly gave up. Nearly half of my special education students cried at some point during these exams. It is unacceptable for eight, nine and ten year olds to be subjected to this kind of torment.

What is even more detrimental is that neither these children – nor their parents or teachers – will ever have access to their test booklets in order to understand how or why the child arrived at an incorrect answer. No benefit is extended to the child from all of these hours of testing if there is no thoughtful, comprehensive feedback. Likewise, I am unable to provide you and your department with clarification and examples regarding my initial list of concerns, as I am not permitted to speak about the content of the exams, or retain a test booklet for commentary. I find it disingenuous that you want teachers and principals to receive feedback, but want none yourself. It would seem that those of us who have spent our lives doing this work would have much insight to offer you.

I would hope that, as Commissioner of the New York State Education Department, you would aspire to an assessment system of which you can be proud. This is not that system. If you were to sit down and take each of these exams, I think you would be embarrassed that your department subjected children to them. I would expect that you, too, would see the flaws in these tests and want better for the students of New York State. This is not a testing system that should be used to evaluate students' abilities, and certainly not a system that can determine teacher effectiveness.

I thank you for your careful consideration of my concerns, and would be happy to clarify them for you or answer any questions that you might have. Please do not hesitate to contact me.



Sharon Emick Fougner  
Principal

Pc: Members of Board of Regents, NYSED

